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DEPT. FOR AF/W, BACHMAN & HEFLIN; AF/FO FOR
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SUBJECT: GON "CLARIFIES" POSITION ON MAHAMID ARAB EXPULSION

REF: NIAMEY 1190

Classified By: POLITICAL OFFICER ZACH HARKENRIDER FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

11. (U) In an evening press conference on October 25, Government of Niger (GON) Spokesman and Minister for Institutional Relations Mohamed Ben-Omar attempted to "clarify" Interior Minister Mounkaila Modi's earlier remarks on the expulsion of the nomadic Mahamid Arabs from the eastern region of the country. Ben Omar stated that the expulsion was in fact a routine "administrative police check" concerning 3,300 Mahamid Arabs from 44 groups residing in the Diffa region. The 3,300 either lack official registration documents or have been identified as troublemakers. The Minister mentioned that traditional chiefs and other community leaders in the Diffa region had demanded the expulsion of the Mahamids in 1999 and 2001, but the GON refrained from acting at that time.

12. (U) During the Q A phase, a reporter asked Ben Omar how he, as an ethnic Arab, felt about the expulsions. He responded, noting that he represented a government, not an ethnic group, and in that capacity was defending Niger's national interests. Note: while Ben Omar is an ethnic Arab, post does not believe that he is a Mahamid. Rather, it appears that his family had its roots among an Arab population in Nigeria. END NOTE

13. (C) COMMENT: Ben Omar's "clarification" was necessitated by Interior Minister Modi's strident proclamation earlier in the week, and the negative media attention occasioned by it. Along with FM Mindaoudou's comments to the Diplomatic corps yesterday, this represents an attempt by the GON to assuage public and international concern over a situation rife with ambiguities. We expect further clarifications to be forthcoming as the GON works out the practical implications of what appears to have been a somewhat rash decision. END COMMENT
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